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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 001992

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: ANTI-NORMALIZERS THREATEN JORDAN MUSIC FESTIVAL,
THEN BACK DOWN

REF: AMMAN 1614

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Local and regional press over the past couple of weeks had reported mounting pressure on the Jordanian government to cancel the upcoming Jordan Festival, in the face of apparently unfounded accusations that a French company involved with organizing the festival also had a hand in Israel's 60th anniversary celebrations in May. Egyptian stars Amr Diab, Omar al-Abdullat, and Mohammad Hamaqi were among the first reported to have pulled out, while Lebanese pop star Elissa announced her plans to stay away shortly thereafter. Several other singers were threatening similar action as long as there remained any suspicion of involvement by an "Israeli company." It was only at the last minute, following a robust government response denying any linkage with Israel, that the anti-normalizers backed down.

¶2. (SBU) Comment: The month-long festival, due to open on July 8, is to feature local and international artists and has been envisioned as a successor to the Jerash Festival. The Jerash Festival has in recent years been plagued by somewhat poor organization and attendance, cancellation (in 2006, because of the Israel-Lebanon conflict that summer), and a sense among some that its time has come and gone (the King himself in an interview published on July 2 pointed out that "the Jerash Festival has been deteriorating over the years although the government has never wavered in its support for it.") Culture Minister Nancy Bakir described 2008 as a year of "transition" from the Jerash Festival to the Jordan Festival. End Comment.

¶3. (U) The rumors of a tie to Israel had been fanned by the political opposition - the al-Ghaddaily on June 22 reported that the Anti-Normalization Committee of the Islamist-dominated professional unions sent out a letter to all Arab performers slated to attend the festival urging them to boycott. The Jordan Artists' Association on June 30 warned that more performers from around the region would make similar announcements soon, adding that "we are doing our utmost so that no Arab singer or musician will take part in the festival because all artists are against normalization and we are siding with the Palestinian people."

¶4. (C) The controversy reached the point that King Abdullah himself felt obliged to comment on it. In a wide-ranging interview published on July 2 in all the Jordanian dailies, he denied that the company organizing the festival was the same one that worked on Israel's celebrations, and decried the "careless and incompetent" journalism that has forced the government to waste time on damage control. The Tourism Board has said ticket sales for the festival were good, and that arrangements and scheduling were ongoing despite calls for a boycott. Note: As the controversy hit its peak, Minister of Culture Bakir exuded pessimism even as she voiced hope that the program would go on as scheduled, in a conversation with EconOff on July 1. Interestingly, Bakir

appeared to dismiss that the boycott calls from the professional unions had anything to do with anti-normalization. In her opinion, Jordan's Islamist "extremists" do not want there to be any culture or arts in the country, only religious experiences. Were the festival a flop, she predicted a negative impact on tourism within Jordan as both Jordanian citizens and Gulf tourists would gravitate to Lebanon and Syria to hear artists from the region - a sentiment repeated by the King in his interview. End Note.

15. (C) Comment: Just days before the festival was set to open, the anti-normalizers withdrew their call for a boycott as it became clear that there were no links with Israel's celebrations. The initial response may have had more to do with broader regional anti-Israel sentiment than the strength of anti-normalizers here in Jordan (reftel); Jordan and the French organizers in this case are at the mercy of the whims of foreign artists and musicians. Nonetheless, the media furor was further reminder of the inordinate and often destructive power of rumor in Jordan and the toxicity of Israel in the public discourse. The King spoke forcefully in taking on both those problems in his media interview. He decried the prevalence of self-defeating rumors, and questioned the premise that were the accusations about the organizer's associations with Israel true, they would be a legitimate reason to boycott the festival: "If all these companies are off limits then we are in deep trouble... If we follow this line of thought, then we will be doing the best service to Israel. All it has to do is use the best technology and best talent in the world and automatically it would be off limits to us." End Comment.

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